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Vietnam: *Fallout from Son Tay*

Hanoi appears to have taken a down-to-earth "war is hell" attitude toward the Son Tay raid and US air strikes a fortnight ago. A high-level and knowledgeable North Vietnamese official reportedly said last week that Hanoi did not consider Son Tay an escalation and will not make US air attacks a major issue. He explained that the Communists realistically expect the US to continue aerial reconnaissance over the North and to retaliate when these flights are challenged. The threat of reprisals, however, would not deter the North Vietnamese from trying to shoot down the planes, but, the official went on, Hanoi was not of a mind to allow such matters to seriously jeopardize the Paris talks.

This attitude has been reflected in the way the Communists have played the affair: their propaganda has been noisy, but it has not gone beyond the position Hanoi has taken on reconnaissance since the bombing halt two years ago—that reconnaissance is a violation of North Vietnamese sovereignty and that the Communists will make every effort to stop it. Air strikes, however, are termed in propaganda as a violation of the US agreement to stop the bombing. In more than two years Hanoi never has raised these as excuses to either stall or break off the talks.

Despite its apparent relaxed attitude about some aspects of the air and commando raids, Hanoi is plainly embarrassed and wary that they were brought off with such ease and it is trying hard to plug the holes in North Vietnam's internal defenses. A flood of domestic broadcasts has reflected new measures, under close party control and high level military supervision, designed to ensure faster and more effective reactions from both militia and regular army units in the countryside. There has been mention of 24-hour watches, better coordination, harder training, and many more outposts, sentinels, and bunkers.

Aside from shoring up the North's defenses Hanoi probably is seeking to fire the collective energies of the North Vietnamese populace to the level prevalent earlier in the war, but which has flagged since the US bombing halt in 1968. Hanoi may also harbor some hope that by painting an impressive picture of fortress North Vietnam, the allies may be dissuaded from mounting new commando assaults.

With so much attention riveted on POWs, Hanoi also has taken some steps to dress up its image on the prisoner question. The Foreign Ministry last week broke with past practice and provided to a Western diplomat information that first had been requested more than 18 months ago on the whereabouts of missing American pilots. Radio Hanoi also has started to broadcast brief taped holiday messages from US captives as in past years. A fairly prominent Western journalist, moreover, has been invited into North Vietnam and he almost certainly will be permitted to film American POWs. The overriding considerations for Hanoi are its image and its belief that eventually it will be able to squeeze some concessions from Washington in return for a general prisoner release. Although neither a tougher policy toward captives nor any wholesale releases are likely, some additional gestures such as providing more information on missing American airmen, may be made to lend weight to Hanoi's professions of leniency.

Troops, Supplies Move in High Gear

Hanoi is continuing to send substantial numbers of troops, both replacements and complete units, down the infiltration trail this dry season. Some 17,100 North Vietnamese soldiers set off in November, the highest monthly total since February 1969. Over half are earmarked for COSVN, probably for duty in Cambodia; about 4,400 are

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headed for northern South Vietnam; and about 2,500, including a regiment of North Vietnamese regulars, are most likely bound for southern Laos. A minimum of four other regular regiments have also started south since September. One clearly is going to COSVN, two are now in southern Laos and a fourth is just above the DMZ. Moreover, two division headquarters are moving south through North Vietnam and one is nearing the Lao and South Vietnamese borders.

Although threats now have developed against the northern provinces and lower Military Region I of South Vietnam, and the central and southern sector of the Lao panhandle, the pattern of over-all Communist dry season deployments in Indochina still is unfolding. It seems clear that many of these units are still on the move while others have been assigned to protect the vital Communist supply arteries running the length of Laos.

Communist truck movements in the Laotian corridors have again increased after several weeks of reduced activity caused by unexpected heavy rains and intensified bombing. [REDACTED] logistic organizations as far south as the confluence of the Cambodia, South Vietnam, and Lao borders are handling truck and waterborne cargo. Various sources confirm a recent sharp increase in truck traffic on two main North Vietnamese passes into Laos and around the western end of the Demilitarized Zone. It will be several weeks, however, before the substantial quantity of supplies now moving will reach the tri-country border area.

The level of resupply during the latter part of November was apparently higher than that of a year ago. This trend is likely to continue. During this dry season the Communists will have to send more supplies just to maintain the force structure and level of fighting of recent months in Laos and South Vietnam. Increased materiel will be needed

to offset losses caused by allied incursions last spring, the rainy season depletion of stocks, the loss of the Sihanoukville supply route, and the new need to supply increased tactical and rear service forces in Laos and Cambodia.

Action Picks Up in the South

In South Vietnam, Communist military activity picked up this week, but still featured the small actions that the enemy has been emphasizing for over a year and a half. The enemy shelled several province capitals and numerous smaller towns and military bases throughout the country. Casualties and damages were generally light.

The sporadic timing of the attacks reflects the current Communist practice of letting local field commanders set their own timetable for action. This permits the enemy to take advantage of local conditions and strike when ready—in contrast to previous so-called "highpoints," that were generally well coordinated and often captured headlines abroad.

Individually these attacks seldom inflict heavy casualties or damage, but they are cumulatively substantial. For example, the Communists have succeeded in overrunning some 65 government outposts in the Mekong Delta so far this year. Although scattered successes on this scale have not rolled back pacification gains, they do help create a significant amount of insecurity in rural areas where the government is trying to consolidate its control.

Despite Communist emphasis on guerrilla tactics and other economy-of-force methods to keep their losses down, South Vietnamese forces have triggered clashes that were costly to the enemy, especially in the Mekong Delta. Late last week, for example, heavy ground battles developed in three delta provinces as the result of aggressive ARVN operations. Stepped-up US and

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South Vietnamese operations in the coastal lowlands of the northernmost provinces comprising MR 1 have also flushed out concentrations of enemy forces and accounted for over 400 Communists killed there each week.

Some South Vietnamese commanders are reorganizing their forces to improve their performance in the many localized actions. For example, Major General Dzu, who assumed command of

MR 2 last August, has directed his two divisions to operate in small units rather than in the often cumbersome multibattalion operations of the past. He has given his territorial security forces—Regional Forces and Popular Forces—a new system of goals and quotas to encourage more aggressiveness against the enemy. Already, Dzu claims that the ratio of enemy-to-friendly casualties has risen markedly since last summer. [REDACTED]

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